



## Déjà vu by Fourth Horse

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**Summary:** In Chicago, Mike crosses paths with a bartender that seems to know him. Unfortunately, he's having a hard time remembering her. (Mikeven bartender!au because why not)

## 1. ace of spades

He didn't even *want* to go in at first, not really. It wasn't his scene - most bars weren't - and it was dark, the gold lighting dim in some areas and neon bright with buzzing colors of violet and blue in others. Cigarette smoke furred in the air. Mike Wheeler knew he'd be stinking like an ashtray until he went home, stripped, burned his clothes and showered in boiling bleach.

But he needed a drink. Soon. Preferably *now*, and he wasn't in the mood to be particularly picky. A bar titled *Doomsday's* seemed to do it.

Music clamored from the jukebox in the corner with raspy rock n' roll, someone singing something about the *AAAAACE OF SPAAAAAAADES* and other things he couldn't make out. There wasn't much of a crowd, and while stuck out like a sore thumb (tall, slender, broad-shouldered and wearing a *fucking turtleneck* underneath a dress blazer) among grizzled, the bearded and the leather-clad, he was ignored.

Which was fine, anyway. Story of his uneventful life.

There was a lonely, empty seat at the corner of the bar-top calling his name. His shuffle to it was awkward, the distinct feeling of *out of place* crawling into the consciousness of his mind. Other patrons were seated, scattered and in the company of empty shot glasses. A lanky man with a spiked choker and a mohawk higher than the Sears Tower was tending to them, sticking to one side of the bar.

And on *his* end, mostly bare and kind of sad, was a short-haired brunette. All he could see was her backside - er , not that he was looking at that specifically but it was a nice one anyway, if he were to have an opinion - as she wiped bottles clean from sticky residue. Something black or leather or, hell, *both* seemed like the unspoken dress code because that's what she fashioned, too. A sleeveless leather vest, fitted for a lady, worn as a shirt.

"Excuse me," he cleared his throat. "Ma'am?"

"Ma'am?"

*Why do I make polite sound so fucking awkward all the time?*

She turned, eyebrow quirked in offense, and the first thing he thought was *pixie*. Her features were cute - pretty, actually - with a little mischief, and she was button-nosed with round eyes that with a slight slant at the end. There was a shimmer of color around them too, bright blue like sapphires, that seemed to match the twisted bracelet on her wrist.

The next thing he thought was, *don't I know you?*

Knee-jerk reaction that made fuck all sense, he rationalized.

"Sorry? I was just trying to be -"

"Do I look old enough to you to be called *ma'am*?"

"What? No!" Jesus *christ*, he ought to abort mission now. "I mean, you look - you look my age?"

"Uh-huh. ID, please."

*Maybe I should just leave*, Mike mentally grouched to himself, taking out his wallet and pulling out identification. *Before she puts rat poison in my drink.*

The bartender took it, somehow being able to inspect it despite shit lighting. It'd only take a second to verify that, yes, he was indeed over the drinking age (*twenty-three* ), but it seemed like her gaze was lingering on every fine detail and it made him uncomfortable.

(Also because who the hell takes flattering license photos? He sure as hell didn't, please stop judging the terrible mandatory photo op.)

"Michael Theodore Wheeler," she read, each syllable pronounced with such careful precision.

"Yep, that's me."

*Sadly.*

"We're the same age."

"Surprise, surprise."

"Indiana?"

*Uh.* His license was an Illinois one, so he hadn't a clue where she pulled that fact from. "How'd you - ?" Mike took it back from her. "Have we met?"

Instead of answering the question with an answer - like most interactions with inquiries occurred - she countered with a question of her own, gesturing to the wide selection of liquid courage in bottles. "What can I get you?"

"A beer, I guess." *How adventurous of me.*

"We have a lot of beer, Mike," she deadpanned, his name rolling off her tongue with such jarring familiarity that it, officially, caused him to brand the night as *weird*. "Pick one."

"Right, sorry. Um." He scratched his nape, squinting at the labels before he settled. "Heineken. Bottle's fine."

*Pop!* went the cap. The glass bottle was set before him, a cool mist blowing from the top. Mike took a tentative sip, and then opted to ask another question in hopes of an actual answer. "What's your name?"

Without skipping a beat, she answered. "Eleven."

"*That's* your name?"

"Are you usually this condescending?"

"No!" he shot back, flustered, before realizing she was actually kind of grinning at him in a shit-eating way so he should probably, uh, chill. "Do you usually like putting your customers in awkward spots or am I just lucky?"

This Eleven smiled, almost like she knew a secret he didn't. "Mmhm, don't know about lucky. You're definitely easy, though."

"Thanks," Mike grumbled sardonically.

"What brings someone like you in here, anyway?"

"Are *you* usually this condescending?"

"Only to people who wear turtlenecks at a dive bar."

*Alright*, he thought. *Fair point*.

She was still smiling, and he almost didn't realize he was too. A little.

"It's a lame story," he waved off. "I'll bore you."

"I'm a bartender, Mike," Eleven snorted, leaning into the bartop with her forearms rested on it. There was a sight of cleavage there, the biker-shirt-vest-thing having such a low *dip* and, well, he did his best to maintain direct eye contact. "I'm cheap therapy. I listen to woes, prescribe you alcohol, and hopefully I'll make you feel better about yourself that you'll tip me generously and come back. Go ahead. I'm sure it's more riveting than the last one who poured out his heart out."

"What was his deal? So I can gauge how entertaining my tale's going to be."

"How costly veterinary bills were going to be and his cat's prescription anal cream."

He almost choked.

"It almost sounds funny, but," she shook her head. "It definitely wasn't."

Mike pounded his chest a couple times, just to make *sure* his airways were properly cleared and he wouldn't die with the thoughts of *feline anal cream* seared into his mind.

"You should probably breathe. It helps."

"Your sage words are much appreciated, I don't what I'd do without them."

"Sage words are mandatory for this position," Eleven chuckled with her chin sitting into her palm, and her stare was both expectant and amused. All he could think about was he'd *seen* that look before; impish, with that very same dimpled cheek, and he couldn't fathom the *where* or *when* or *who*. "C'mon. I'll pretend not to judge you too harshly."

Mike fought a groan and lost. "Fine. Okay, fine. I was on a date a couple blocks away from here. A really crappy one. That's it."

"Juicy already," she commented, officially intrigued. "Blind date?"

"Nah, just someone I was seeing."

"Girlfriend?"

"Like hell did I let it get *that* serious."

"Commitment phobe?"

"Who, me?"

"Who else am I talking to?"

"She wasn't my type," he huffed, right before polishing off the rest of his beer and requesting another one. Like the heavenly booze angel of snark she was, she swiftly retrieved, uncapped, and passed it over for his consumption. "I gave it a try. Didn't work out, so I went to end it politely -"

"Did you call her 'ma'am,' too?"

" - no, I didn't. Let me finish. Anyway, my dad comes to work at the branch out here sometimes and works with *her* dad, so that's how we got set up in the first place but it turns out she did it as a favor and, um, kind of out of pity. Which, hey, we didn't like each other, the feeling was mutual, cool, but fucking *pity dating*? How is that even a thing? I get that my nickname growing up was *frogface* but I didn't think I was that awful, god."

Her brows crinkled together, frowning. "You're not awful."

"You're supposed to say that. Being nice is how you get good tips."

"Have I really been all that nice to you since you came in, though?"

*Alright*, Mike considered. *Fair point again*.

Eleven pulled away and picked up a bottle of whiskey by the neck, mouthing the numbers *one, two, three, four* as she poured it into a glass from the spout. "Why bother with how she sees you when she when it sounds like she never cared in the first place?"

He eyed the drink, then her. "I guess."

"What *is* your type?"

"Why, you interested?" He was never that bold, *ever*, and the second beer he just finished downing wasn't even enough to glean a buzz worthy of an excuse to explain that strangely confident word vomit.

Maybe talking to her was really that easy. Maybe she was entertaining him because she felt pity, too.

Maybe he was a moron and needed to shut up.

"Depends," she clucked her tongue and cocked her hip, thinking. "Do application fees apply?"

"I'll think about waiving them, maybe. Also," Mike blinked at the glass slid in his direction. "I didn't order that."

"It's on me."

He was hesitant. She nudged it closer.

"Promise."

"Are you trying to get me drunk to take advantage of me?"

"Yes," was her composed answer, straight-faced and blase.

Five seconds later, as if on cue, they both laughed.

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Mike hadn't come by Doomsday's the next day, nor the one after. He was a graduate student at Illinois Tech; the load of school work was intense and often grueling, class hours ran long, the work study program was demanding and he had deadlines to meet. Coffee had been his mistress instead of whiskey and beer, but the two latter options would have been fun options too.

Five nights passed (she wasn't counting, honest) before she saw the glimpse of shaggy black mop on top of a head and a knitted sweater vest over a button shirt, the glowing nerd beacon of *help me, I don't belong*. Eleven could see him plain as day across the room even through the cigarette smog. He spotted her too, right where he saw her last. Behind the bar, with a towel in her hand.

Her short hair was slicked back, all away from her face and into a bob of a ponytail. Shimmery eye shadow again, this time a vibrant magenta, and she wore a dark crop-top shirt that exposed her flat stomach.

"You know I can't get you a free drink *every* time, right?"

"Well, damn," he made a face, biting back a sarcastic sigh. "That was kind of the whole point of coming here."

"Obviously. These people aren't your crowd."

"No, and it's really hard to get the stench of smoke out of my clothes," Mike mused, sitting directly across from her. "But I'm here. I might as well buy at least one drink."

"At *least* one," Eleven smirked. "Beer, whiskey, or..."

"Or?"

"Cherry bombs," she finished. There was a mini-fridge right under the bar he couldn't see, because she had bent down and opened it to pull out a cold mason jar of little red delicacies soaked in something he assumed had a high alcohol percentage. "Technically not a drink, but it can be a snack to go *with* your drink."

"Can I - ?" He motioned to see the jar. Curious, he unscrewed the lid and took whiff. "*Jesus*. What are they soaked in?"

"Everclear."

"You're really working hard on getting me shitfaced, aren't you."

"I didn't take advantage of you *last* time."

Mike grinned and passed the container back. "I wasn't drunk last time, El. Maybe buzzed, but definitely not drunk."

There was a second where she stared at him, blankly, and he wondered if he had somehow fucked up in the last two seconds of their interaction.

"Did you make a nickname out of my nickname?"

Oh.

He did, didn't he?

"It's not like I can make a nickname out of your *real* name," he protested. "Which I don't know yet, by the way."

Eleven plucked a cherry from the jar and pulled it free from the stem with her teeth, and Mike wanted to know *how the fuck* she made that look so attractive. "I'm aware."

*Thought so.* There was no way a number could be her name, but now that he was looking at her a second time - was it weird to say she *looked* like an 'El'? "Are you going to tell me?"

The time it took her deliberate about it didn't inspire much confidence. "You're smart. You'll figure it out one day."

Mike wasn't satisfied. His eyes tightened, looking at her - really looking at her - trying to match every little detail of her to some old memory buried in his head, desperate to spring free and smack him in the face with the greatest epiphany of all time. The curve of her button nose, the dimples, her glossy pink mouth. There was something *there*, something about how shiny her lips looked that nagged at him but in the end, nothing. Nothing came.

As a peace offering, she extended him a vodka-infused cherry.

"Patience you must have, my young padawan."

"Did you really just quote *Star Wars* to me?"

"It's getting you hot and bothered, huh?"

He wiped a hand over his face like it'd do something to hide the frustration. "That's it. You really must know me from somewhere and I'm clearly the idiot that can't remember. Or you're stalking me. *Are* you stalking me?"

"Nah."

"How are you so sure that I'll figure it out someday, then?"

"You just will," El shrugged, picking up another cherry for herself. "It's going to bug you too much to *not* figure it out."

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She was right. Not knowing was bothering the shit out of him.

*Someday* was definitely not the third time he saw her. Not even the fourth or fifth. Sixth time she wasn't around. Contrary to popular belief, she didn't live there and was entitled to nights off. He expressed his utmost disappointment about it the seventh time he saw her.

They talked. A lot. He was an open book. She was a little more guarded, so he tread carefully. Sometimes over a week would pass before he could drop by for a drink, and other times she was so busy her attention was split. But that was okay, he thought, because whatever words they managed to squeeze in during high-busy times were worth it.

Mike never drank too much. He ordered the same amount of the same kind of beer every time. Her tip always matched the bill, nothing less. And after those nights, he'd come back to his apartment stinking like an ashtray.

He learned not to mind it so much.

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*A/N: this will hopefully be a fluffy and short AU, 2-3 chapters max!*

## 2. promises in the dark

On the eighth visit, he met the owner.

"Kali," she introduced herself, small and feisty with vibrant hues of purples streaked through her hair. There was a lilt in her voice, one rare around these parts, but he didn't have the courage to dive into the territory of personal questions.

They shook hands from across the bar. It was dim and smoky, like always. "Mike," he offered his name, smile amicable. "Kali - Hindu Goddess? Death, time." A beat. "Doomsday. Wow, that makes a lot of sense now."

That earned him one of her smiles, a half-turn of her mouth that was akin to more of a smirk if you squint. "Smart man. I take it you're here for my sister?"

*Sister.* He knew a bit about El's family from their talks. Deceased biological parents, adopted father, adopted sibling (who now had a face, name, gender). It was information without the weight of specifics - she seemed to skirt around some details, and he wondered if it was because it might give away something that'd finally make him remember who the hell she *was*.

"Um," he scratched beneath his eye. "I'm just here for a beer."

"You're here for my sister."

*Fuck, am I that obvious?*

Kali continued like he'd said those very words aloud. "You don't make it difficult to figure out," she tacked on, and he didn't know if he should interpret the look in her eyes as amused or judgmental. Could be both. "You don't exactly *look* like someone who has friends here."

No bandanas, no leather, no boots or spikes, no crazy Gandalf beard or wildly styled hair. Mike Wheeler was clean-shaven, sporting a Ghostbusters t-shirt under open flannel, jeans, and well-worn converse sneakers. It was just as out of place as the sweater vests he

sometimes came in.

Either way, his ensembles screamed *fucking nerd*.

"You also stay long when she is here, and have only one beer and leave when she's not. I assume it's to make yourself not seem so predictable. It doesn't work well in your favor."

His face flushed and he kind of really wanted to get the hell out of dodge, but his ass remained glued to the barstool. Might as well face embarrassment head on. "She's nice to talk to?"

*Yeah, sure, go with that, because that's not pathetic sounding.*

"You could always ask for her number, you know."

"Well, the only number she's given me is literally 'eleven,'" Mike confessed, fingernail scraping at the wooden surface. Someone with a sharpie and knife took some liberty on it. Scratched in names, curse words in black, and artistic displays of expressions in the form of blessed male anatomy. *Yep, that's a big, veiny penis.* "Besides, I'm sure she gets that request a lot. I've seen it."

"Ah, so you've notice the men eyeing her but never even noticed my *presence* around here." Kali's grin was full of teeth now, wide and bright like the Cheshire Cat's. "I'm intrigued."

Meanwhile he was *pretty sure* his face resembled a tomato.

*Yeah*, he realized. *That's pretty bad.*

The door that led to the back swung open, and in emergence was Eleven carrying clinking bottles of beer in a box. It was clearly very heavy - and her arms were small, bird-boned - so with relief, she set them down, straightened the disarray of her tank top (the face on it, he recognized, was Madonna), and exhaled loudly.

"I see you've met my sister," El greeted dryly, already highly suspicious of Kali's look and mightily concerned about the bright redness of Mike's face. "Is she harassing you?"

"She's not -"

"Only somewhat," her sister replied without shame. "I had to say hello. He's a new patron of the bar and wanted to make sure your service was..." Kali let her eyes flit between the two of them, smug. "Satisfactory."

Eleven rolled her eyes and with a sway of her hips shoved the shorter woman aside. "Yours clearly isn't. You haven't even asked him what he wanted to drink, have you?"

"You're here now for that part."

"Will you go in the back and double-check inventory, then? I think Axel screwed up and we're short on a couple things."

Her demeanor darkened with aggravation. "That fucking *plonker*," Kali hissed out, right before storming away with Mike a fleeting afterthought.

Not that he minded.

"I didn't know your sister owned the place," Mike brought up. It was early still; the crowd hadn't come in like a tsunami wave to eat up her attention. He also may have timed it that way, but that was neither here or there. *Ahem*.

The shimmer around her eyes tonight reminded him of moonlight, maybe a little bit of stardust - silvery, matching well with the fine black eyeliner that she always wore. "I figured you'd meet her eventually," she smiled in a way that insinuated she was smothering a giggle. "What'd she say to you anyway?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Oh, *something*. You're lying."

*Friends aren't supposed to lie, either. Damn it.* "Can't a guy get a drink first?"

"Nope."

"Like, I'm almost one hundred percent certain the exchange works with money, not gossip. Should I get your manager?"

El studied him, leaning over the bar and slanting her eyes. "You didn't cheat and ask her my name, did you?"

"Pfft, no," Mike scoffed, narrowing his own right back. "I *like* the challenge."

Apparently she did too, not backing down from their closeness - even *with* the bar anchored between them - and while it didn't scare him backwards, he felt a warmth spread across his cheeks and hoped, prayed, *begged* at the Powers to Be that he wouldn't color again.

But he did (because she was *so pretty*, the kind of mischievous pretty he'd imagine a fairy would be), and she chuckled. "Heineken?"

"Please and thank you."

It was so frosty cold when it was finally in his possession that he could have held it to his cheek, and there would have been excess steam from the contrast in temperature. She excused herself a moment to shelve the bottles from the back. In the background, the jukebox resounded with a tune he finally knew, the lyrics mouthed; *where brave and restless dreams are both won and lost, on the edge is where it seems it's well worth the cost* -

"You like Pat Benatar?" An open glass jar was set in the middle point, reeking heavily of sweetness and alcohol. Cherry bombs again. They were hers to nibble on throughout the night, and she was kind enough to share the merchandise (she never charged him, but it was two dollars for three of them). "Kali thinks she's too poppish for the bar, but I fed the machine for it anyway. I earned it."

Mike grinned, reaching to pick one up by the stem. "Yeah, she's good. I actually like understanding the lyrics of songs from time to time too."

"God, same," she groaned, and moved around to grab a couple things; a cutting board, knife, assorted fruits. Garnishes had to be prepped for the night. "It's definitely a more of a metalhead crowd? Standard rock n' roll's acceptable, but anything else gets the guys riled up to the point of brawls."



"Hah. I'd love to see that."

El cocked a brow, slicing through the first lemon like butter. "Would you love to help me sweep glass from the floor?"

"Yep," he replied breezily. "I'd clean the blood off the pool cues too, and help you pull the darts out of people's bodies."

Her sigh was so *content* it was like she was imagining the luxury of his help in a daydream. "That happens more often than you think, and if you're serious then you may just be my favorite person ever - and I might kiss you for it."

The way she said it - so composed, so *casual* - almost had him choke on the sip of beer meant to erase the taste of high alcohol content from his tongue. Was she flirting? Did she not know what kind of effect her words had on him? Was this friendly bartender talk? Eleven was *audacious*. Nothing seemed to embarrass her, all while he struggled to keep himself from looking like the cherries shared between them.

Suddenly, the air around them went stale with awkwardness. The knife kept moving. Mike rolled the beer bottle between his hands.

Then, guiltily, she looked up. "Sorry, was that -"

And at the same time, "Would you ever consider -"

*Oh.*

El beat him to it the second round. "You first."

"Fine." *No, not fine, what the hell do you think you're about to say?*  
"Your sister had me kinda thinking."

Her gaze rounded fearfully. "This can't end well."

*That really depends,* he thought sourly to himself. He'd already dug a shallow grave for himself already that he might as well dig a full six-foot gravesite. "About asking you for numbers that aren't associated with your nickname."

"Are you inquiring about my weight?"

"Seriously?"

"Or my shoe size, which is strange -"

"*Definitely not.*"

"Bra size?"

"Aren't the letters more important than the numbers in that scenario?"

"Technically," she shrugged.

Mike hid his face behind his hands.

Except her fingers, cold and sticky from her work, came to pry them off and she was *laughing*. Not mockingly like he'd feared, which he at least sought solace in. "Mike, hey - look at me - I'm sorry! My phone number, you can *have* my phone number."

"You don't have to -"

"I'm not your bad date, and this isn't a pity thing," Eleven interrupted. And he, for some reason, believed her without a shred of doubt. "I want you to have it."

His own fingers were cool, but nothing like hers - and he didn't mind the citrusy mess on her skin as he clasped her hands like he was meaning to warm them. Strangely, it was the first time they'd ever made physical contact. "And I want your phone number, trust me."

"There's a but to this, isn't there?"

"What a plot twist, right?" Mike grinned crookedly. "It's the name thing. I'm not asking you to tell me. I said I liked the challenge. I'll remember you and your name and once I do, *then* you can give me your number."

Eleven didn't expect those terms. Her teeth nibbled her bottom lip, considering, and with her free hand selected a cherry from the jar. It was pressed against his mouth; the flavoring sweet, tart, and had a

bitter bite. "Okay," she whispered in sultry, dulcet tones. "But only if you promise."

He took her offering, and summoned the valor to kiss her decadent fingertips. "I do."

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The ninth visit was brief due to a biker convention that overflowed Doomsday's with business. Nothing to really complain about – she would be making a *lot* of money – but he couldn't even find a seat where she was, and all they managed to do was spare glances and sheepish smiles.

*Sorry*, she worded with her lips, voiceless.

*Good luck*, he replied the same way.

Then, something happened before the tenth.

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Inside a brick-built corner building, up the third flight of stairs, was his apartment. Currently, it was a mess.

Its location was in walking distance to most things, and while the rent was steep the neighborhood was at least decent; he liked the people in the building, the walls weren't infested with rats and the pipes didn't freeze much during the winter. He could decorate it as he damn well pleased (framed movie posters, for one, were hung all around) and on the shelves was a diverse selection of books, old science trophies, a sentimental action figure or two.

But scattered on the floor of his living room were old paper boxes full of mementos that had spilled over. There was a phone squished between his ear and shoulder, the mile-long chord making its way from the kitchen to where he was that moment.

"Do you by any chance remember if we went to high school with anyone named Eleven?"

He flipped through sophomore yearbook, passing his finger over every picture of a girl that maybe, just *maybe* looked like the punk pixie that served his beer. It was his fourth time combing through

every *one* of these things, yet he felt like he was missing something. Somehow. In a glaringly obvious, stupid kind of way.

On the other end, Lucas snorted. "No? Is this the chick Dustin was talking about?"

"What?"

"Uh, the bartender? Dustin already filled me in. You called him *and* Will for the same thing."

Ironically, Mike found his friend's boxed picture to glare thousands of daggers at. "Are you guys talking behind my back?"

"We're debating whether or not your obsession's cute or creepy. Weren't you dating that one girl –"

"Barely. Also, not *anymore*. Also, not obsessed."

"Damn, man." Lucas didn't even bother hiding his laugh. What a great jerkoff of a friend *he* was. "You move on quick."

"It wasn't serious," he defended, going onto the next page. "Apparently I was a pity date."

"Did she say that or did you assume it?"

"Bit of both. Doesn't matter. C'mon, Lucas! Help me out here. You're my only hope."

"High school was eons ago and we were the nerds – do you really think I've cared to reminisce over the four adolescent years of hell?"

He sighed, snapping the book shut, ultimately discouraged from sifting through the other two again. It was the same faces over and over; all of them older, some of them a little more stupid with age. Hawkins didn't often get new blood, and those always stuck out like sore thumbs. None of them were El. "You're useless."

"How do you know this isn't some charade for tips?" his friend inquired on. Mike felt his patience dip. "Dustin said she knew you were from Indiana but maybe it was a lucky guess, some kind of con

artist tactic. I don't know."

"Is the idea of someone liking me such a foreign concept to you, or are you just being a douche canoe?"

"Don't you dare twist my words, you asshat." There was a ruffling sound and minor white noise before he spoke again. "I just think it's kind of weird? If you've been looking through the yearbooks and no one else remembers her, then she's either a stalker now or was some creepy stalker *then* that avoided picture day and probably made a shrine of bubblegum out of you."

"Isn't that how you got together with your girlfriend?"

"Hey, I didn't –"

"Max's nickname for you is literally *stalker*," Mike retorted. Adjusting the phone in its place, he kept his hands free to stack up his mess up. Old, loose photos fluttered around. He snatched them, shoving it all into the box unceremoniously. "You would write down the times she was at the arcade, see if there was a pattern, and make sure you were there *every time* –"

"Stop stop stop."

"Can't take the shit when it's dished back, can you?"

Another brush of white noise, the addition of a very *feminine* muffled sound, and snickering paired with a distinct *Max, stop it!* "He can't," added the devil in question because of *course* she was there. "Didn't know about the bubblegum shrine, though. Ew. I'm questioning the very foundation of this relationship."

"You're several years late for that." Mike rolled his eyes. "Hey, Max."

"Eat a dick, Wheeler," she delightfully replied, fully in control of the phone. "Sorry about your girl problems. You know how Lucas has to be skeptical of everyone's motives. Ever thought about asking your mom if it's someone you knew from her?"

"That's exactly what I need to do, involve my *mother*."

"It's a suggestion, geez. Maybe you just have to...think outside the box, I guess?"

"Uh – maybe," came his distracted reply, craning his neck to around to make sure he'd collected everything. He didn't. There was a Polaroid picture on the floor, face down, 84' – *Snow Ball* written in faded ink on the back.

*Outside the box.* The only thing left to put away.

Still there, Wheeler?"

Mike was. Physically, at least. Mentally – well, definitely elsewhere. "Max," he started, reaching for fallen memory. *1984. Hawkins Middle School. Cheesy winter dance for kids on the precipice of puberty.* "Can you ask Lucas if he remembers..."

"If I remember who?"

He flipped the picture over, and there it was. Him, thirteen, clad in tan and baby blue. Her, same age, a curl on her forehead, in a dress of a slightly richer blue, speckled with fuchsia dots – the same color that was glistened around her eyes. *Shimmer.*

"Mike. Ranger to Paladin, Ranger to Paladin." Pause. "Over."

*Do you want to dance?*

*I...don't know how.*

*Me neither.*

"Huh," Mike breathed, and his mouth slowly breaking into a smile. "I found her."

*Do you want to figure it out?*

"Wait, what, who is –"

That smile, that *dimple.*

"Night, guys."

The phone was discarded. Everything else might as well have been, too, because finally, *finally* he'd done it – remembered her name, remembered *her*, all in the decade-old photograph that reflected the last night he'd seen her.

*Jane. Jane Hopper.*

### 3. time after time

Truth be told, Mike never actually *forgot* Jane Hopper.

Not exactly.

---

The tenth visit was premeditated, and there were three vital things he needed to be sure of to make it a success.

First: *make sure she's actually working, otherwise the whole thing is pointless.*

Second: *go on a night business sucks and her attention isn't divided.*

Third: *you don't get to know that yet, that's a surprise.*

March had arrived, but the warmth and flourish of spring had been delayed. Instead came a constant overcast of clouds, a silvery veil blocking all things that gave light - the sun, moon, stars - and with it, snowfall. It came down like a soft powder, stubbornly sticking to everything it touched, signing towards ill weather forecasted to come their way in the early hours of the morning.

It wasn't anything new for Chicago, or Illinois in general.

Though it was the *wind* Mike couldn't stand as he walked, turning the corner and hurrying his long legs down the sidewalk. It blew harshly, burning his cheeks until they became distinctly pink and burrowing the chill deep into his very bones.

At the entrance of Doomsday's was a man whose aura clearly radiated the sentiment of *Do Not Fuck With Me*, with rippling pectorals and menacing biceps, and a nametag unashamedly spelling out the name *Funshine*.

He shook his head at the approaching man and held the door open. "Jesus, Wheeler. Did you seriously walk all the way over here?"

"Yeah," he answered and what was that *sound*? Oh, right. His teeth. They were chattering. The corduroy coat bundling him up did a shit



job at keeping him warm but what the hell ever. Mike was *in*, and the building's temperature would defrost him just fine.

"Gotta ask, but," Funshine crossed his arms, leveling his gaze with the strangest stereotype of a person that just so happened to gain the status of *regular patron* recently. "The hell is in that?"

*That*, of course, being styrofoam box held tightly in his gloved hands - *a surprise, perhaps?*

"It's for Eleven," Mike replied with pep, a grin so bright it stretched wide across his face, and he'd consider it painful if his cheeks weren't so numb. He let him take a peak. "No weapon. See?"

Funshine could barely contain the gruff sound of his laugh.

"You trying to marry her or somethin'?"

"What? *No*, it's just -"

Then, he considered.

"Would that actually work on her?"

"We'll just have to see, won't we," Funshine humored and clapped a massive hand over his shoulder, pushing him along. "Go on and get out of my way. I have actual IDs to check."

Mike didn't need to be told twice. He moved, still beaming and confidence soaring. The contents in the box were inspired by a minute quirk of the past, one he hoped hadn't changed with the passage of time - *memories were strange, strange things, why do the most insignificant things stick out so strongly* - but judging from the reaction received, he had the feeling the cosmos were on his side.

It was a ghost town of drinkers. One sweeping gaze around the wide room confirmed it, including her location. His trajectory didn't lead him to the final destination of the bar. Eleven wasn't *there*, you see, and Mike zig-zagged through the set of pool tables, dodged the one game of darts whizzing through the air, and stopped at corner that homed the jukebox.

Centimeters kept them separate. There was no wooden nook smack-dab in the middle, he wasn't rooted to the barstool for once - and admittedly, he had to seize the moment to drink up the sight of her. That striking lack of *height*, for starters, which he never took to mind until now.

(But then again anyone compared to him could easily fit the descriptor of 'short.' His visible reputation of 'beanstalk' was for a reason.)

Eleven was sifting through the selection of records, head bobbing to the sound of bellowing tunes. Her shirt was lopsided, exposing the shoulder he tapped his finger on.

She didn't startle.

"Hey, stranger," El greeted, spinning around to face him, the shimmer around her eyes a blue so soft and brought it conjured memories of her dress, how luck had it that it paired so well with his own ensemble that night eons and eons ago. "Did you - you walked here, didn't you?"

It was soft, worried scold as she dusted the last bits of snowflake that had yet to melt off his broad shoulders. There was chipped polish in her fingernails, black. An odd detail to notice, but he found himself immersed in searching for the little things.

(Her hair was pulled into a short ponytail and there were untamed strands loose and tucked behind her ear, curled, because that was her hair. *Curly*. He remembered it always being curly.)

"It wasn't far," he replied because, really, why would a cold commute on feet stop him from dropping by? Mike would live. "Looking for a song?"

Well, at that very *moment* she'd been looking at what was in his hands - the underwhelmingly unspectacular styrofoam box he'd yet to explain - but she craned her neck up to meet his eyes again.

"Wanna help me decide?" Her smile was wry, lips all shiny gloss.

"On something that everyone in this room might hate?"

"Obviously."

"I'm in."

She turned back around and he didn't see the need to stand side by side - he could see the glass window of the jukebox without much trouble just by peering over the top of her head, something he made sure to tease about. In the end, he made the selection. *Time After Time. Cyndi Lauper.*

Mike gave her the coin to insert into the machine with pride.

"I think they would have hated *Girls Just Wanna Have Fun* a little more," she giggled, finalizing the transaction. "But I like this one. It shouldn't take too long for it to come on. Did you want a drink? I can mosey on over to my end and be productive for you."

"Nah," Mike expressed, scratching the nervous itch that tingled at his nape. "I was actually gonna see if you've got a minute to sit? I mean, you look *so busy*, pondering sappy pop songs just to make people twitch."

(Dottie was manning the well of booze all by her lonesome, doing absolutely nothing productive except for filing her nails. There was time.)

El wagged a finger and tsked. "Pop songs, sure. Sappy? That's all you, mouth breather. Are you trying to be sneaky by setting the mood?"

"You sure that's not wishful thinking on your end?"

"Could be," she quipped, mischief a bright glint in her amber eyes, and offered him her hand. "Is that food you're carrying around?"

He closed his fingers around hers - *like puzzle pieces lost and searching, they were found and fit* - and allowed her to lead him towards the empty end of the bar's stretch. "Maybe it is," he casually shrugged. "Don't be so nosy."

They settled in close. His knees brushed hers (an innocent accident, really), yet she didn't adjust her seat to pull away. "Any plans on sharing?"

The box was set atop the table surface, and after shedding his gloves he carefully slid it towards her.

"Well."

"Well?"

"No need to share," he confirmed, opting to take a more serious tone for this. "It's for you, actually."

His swell of courage warbled a bit, doubts and second guesses bubbling at the pit of his stomach but he was determined to push through it. It wasn't as if there was a *ring* in here.

*(what he didn't know was that only a handful of years from now, they would be at this exact spot, wintertime, with a moment almost exactly like this and inside would be that very **thing**)*

"I'm intrigued," Eleven cautiously admitted as she took the styrofoam container, handling it as if it were precious glass, or a bomb at risk of detonating with any sudden movement. "Also a *little* suspicious."

Mike nudged her with his leg. "Just open it."

She did. And her assumption had been correct: it *was* food. A waffle.

A lone, golden, cooked-to-perfection waffle with absolutely nothing on it. There was no whipped cream, no syrup. Simple, plain, and delectably edible.

He watched the way her eyes went as wide and round as the very thing he'd gotten her.

"Eighth grade. We had zero classes together," Mike mused, dragging his fingernails across the grooves of the bartop; the lines carved in by knives, the streaks of permanent marker he knew by memory now. "But I remember my friends pissed me off about something stupid, I don't know, like some group activity was decided through a democratic process and I lost. Middle school drama, right? Anyway, I went outside to eat and I saw you, by yourself. Under a tree. Eating a plain waffle like it was a sandwich."

Mike remembered thinking, *that girl's weird.*

He also remembered thinking, right after, *well, so am I.*

It was why he asked if he could sit with her, and why he introduced himself. A new friend was made that day. He ate lunch with her often, and sadly, it was short-lived.

But to say that he had forgotten her wasn't true. Mike remembered Jane. He remembered that she didn't talk to other people much, that she didn't fit the regular mold of girls through their grade - he remembered overalls, shirts too big for her, unruly hair, the indentation of her cheeks every time she smiled. He remembered denying any sort of crush the one time Dustin teased him, and remembered realizing how that was a load of crap when he had awkwardly asked if she was going to that ridiculously cheesy winter ball and, oh, *did you wanna to together?*

Their thirteen-year-old selves danced with only one another that night.

Winter break followed. Then came Christmas, New Year's and afterwards, *finally*, classes resumed as normal, and he'd been eager come back.

Except she wasn't there. Rumor had it, she moved.

Mike remembered thinking how he almost kissed her that night of the Snow Ball. He remembered regretting that he didn't. It would have been his first.

*Eleven* didn't wear overalls. She styled her hair in ways that hid the nature of her curls, she didn't have the timidity towards human interaction that would cripple her job as bartender and yet, she was definitely *Jane*. Years passed, changing people as it was meant to do, and the clarity of old memories may have faded but he knew that smile, knew those dimples.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the polaroid picture.

"I never forgot," he went on, shoulders having lifted into a bit of a sheepish shrug. "I just needed to make the correlation between you

and...you. Which, okay, sounds kind of dumb, but -"

"It's not," El defended and (for now, as she had plans to *devour* that waffle as is) set the box down, swapping it for the picture. "I get it, Mike. It's been *ten years*. I mean, have you seen this? We looked like babies."

The edges of the photo were frayed, there was a crease down the middle from years of storage, the colors were faded but the memory *itself* had brightened, all those seemingly insignificant aspects of that resurging - how stuffy the inside of that gymnasium felt, the gaudy winter decorations, the beat of a song she couldn't name. She was aglow with nostalgia.

"You recognized me! Like, instantly."

"Not *instantly*! Not until I read your name and asked you where you were from. And your thing with sweaters -"

"What's wrong with my sweaters?"

El pushed her lips into a flat line to battle the beginnings of laughter and hugged the picture flat against her chest. "Nothing! You just haven't outgrown them, is all."

Mike blinked down at his - *you guessed it* - sweater.

"It's not a bad thing."

"Uh-huh."

"I *like* them."

"I think I'm gonna eat this waffle now?"

The spark of a challenge ignited and their hands shot forth in a race of who would lay claim on the waffle. Mike's got to it first, but hers - still holding the polaroid - locked over his.

He was grinning, victorious. She was huffy, pouting.

Then, they heard it.

*lying in my bed I hear the clock tick*

*and think of you*

*caught up in circles confusion*

*is nothing new*

*flashback, warm nights*

*almost left behind*

With it came the disgruntled sounds of disapproval and someone at the other end shouting *WHICH ONE OF YOU ASSHOLES PICKED THIS*. Mike and El could barely hold it in - they fell into each other, her giggles muffled by a mouthful of his coat and his teeth bit down on his bottom lip, *hard*, doing all he could to avoid self-incrimination.

"So, uh," he cleared his throat in effort to mask his amusement. "Is there any way I can get that number now, *Jane*?"

"On three conditions."

"*Three*?"

El held up one finger for the first. "Try to avoid calling me Jane?"

"Okay," Mike nodded. *There's a story there*. "I can do that. The second?"

"It's still my waffle."

"Speaking of someone who hasn't outgrown anything..."

"Nope," she shamelessly responded, extracting the waffle from the box to relive the memory of their first meeting. She held it like a sandwich, bit into it, gave a thoughtful hum as she finished chewing. "You got this from a food truck, didn't you? The one that parks about four blocks away?"

His mouth twitched, somewhat in awe because *how did she* - "You're obsessed."

It was true. There was one that stationed itself not far from here and he stumbled upon the other day adjusting his walking route around the city. Earlier, he'd stood outside of it for almost a half-hour in the freezing weather, mentally arguing with himself on toppings and flavors before sticking to what he recalled: her eating them plain, so he would get her exactly that.

"You're impressed." Eleven's smile was cheeky. "I know my waffles. Ready for the third?"

"God, I hope so."

"Let's get out of here?"

---

Lucky them, Dottie was the one scheduled to close.

"Are you cold? Do you want my gloves?" The wind wasn't *as bad* but it was still present, sharp and merciless when felt - and the snow, like *that* had stopped. There was a thickening blanket of white around them, and he was over one hundred percent sure the tattered leather jacket she was wrapped in wasn't enough to keep her body heat in tact.

El didn't seem bothered by it. "It's okay. I have pockets -"

Pockets weren't *enough*. Mike already had his gloves off. "Damnit, I knew I should have brought a scarf too. Here, though, take these -"

"You said you didn't live far -"

"I don't but it's still *cold*," Mike insisted stubbornly but so full of good intent that he could very well *explode*.

She knew she would inevitably lose any argument that left her hands bare. "Fine," El sighed in fond exasperation and slipped on the gloves. "Happy?"

"Are you warmer?"

There was an interesting expression that flashed over her face - something along with *oh my god, why are you like this?* - and before he



knew it, there was a set of arms entrapping the circumference of his waist, and a tiny but exceptionally powerful force pushing his back up against the brick wall of the bar behind him.

*He*, at the very least, was feeling very heated now.

"I'll only be warmer if we walk back to your place like this," she scoffed. "Hugging all the way there."

Mike wasn't completely dismissing the idea. "It'd be difficult," he pondered out loud, wrapping up around her as if he were her own personal meat shield from the harshness of nature. "But not unpleasant?"

A snowflake fell to her nose. He wasn't the least bit timid when he moved in, rubbing it away with his own.

"None of this is unpleasant," she murmured and there it was; the little hollow of her rosy-colored cheeks that came with her smiles.

He kissed her then, not a beat skipped; he kissed her softly, kissed her sweetly, and she kissed him too. Nothing else existed that moment. Not the bone-rattling Chicago gusts, not the wet snowfall, not the wintry chill of the night. Kissing her felt as if he was teasing embers - and if he kept kissing her the heat would climb, and the flames would spread like wildfire.

Their breaths were hot and visible when they pulled apart.

*(a part of him swears that he's done this with her before, somewhere else, some other time -)*

"Hey, El?" Jane. She was Jane, but the nickname he'd given to her felt rolled off his tongue easier - like it was natural, like *that* was actually her name.

"Mmm?"

There were questions he wanted to ask, things like -

*Was us meeting again a coincidence?*

*Do you believe in fate?*

"Mike?" Her eyes searched his, wondering, *what if* -

"Nothing," was what he decided to say, and pressed his lips against the spot between her brows. "You're just...beautiful."

*(a part of him feels like he's said that to her before too, but if there's one thing he's sure of, it's this: he'll be saying it in the future)*

---

A blizzard ravaged Chicago that night. El hardly noticed, and not for reasons one might think.

Mike Wheeler, despite bringing home a woman during wee hours, was a complete gentleman. The two of them paid little attention to the passage of time, swaddled in wooly blankets and nursing mugs of hot chocolate, all while invading each other's personal space.

And as promised, she had given him her number.

"Here," she said, pinching the old polaroid between her fingers and holding it to him - because on the back, next to the numbers '85 were a different set of digits, freshly handwritten. "Your prize."

He took it proudly. "Hey, I worked *really* hard for this!"

"You did," Eleven giggled, reaching over to smooth the mess of his bangs; soft to touch and midnight black. "Hey, Mike?"

They hadn't moved from the couch or gotten *any* sleep. The sun was up, gold streaming through the windows, and the blankets were tangled up their legs and the mugs were set on the floor, empty.

He had given her one of his sweatshirts. A blue hoodie that she zipped up for that extra bit of coziness, and sometimes the scent of it would be confused with words like *home* and that was too weird to make any sort of sense, but *what if* -

Mike nudged her with a socked foot. "Yeah?"

*Do you believe in fate?*

"I'm glad you walked into my bar that night," was what she had decided to say, and it was the truth in its purest, simplest form.

*Coincidence?*

He shifted, adjusting his legs and arms and it was as if she *understood* without needing to hear an explanation. Mike had made space for her, and she nestled against him in a perfect fit - *two puzzle pieces.*'

*Home*, in retrospect, didn't seem like the strangest thing to think about.

---

*A/N: had to end it with a bit of mystery there...*

*jesus, sorry for taking so long to finish this? life happens. so does writer's block. i'm not completely satisfied with this but i was determined to finish this, and i hope it goes well (and i understand if it doesn't lol)*

*thanks for the comments!*